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ABSTRACT

A taxonomy developed for the study of the growth and development of written language from the perspective of social event was tested with a group of 68 children, aged three to six years. The subjects were presented with a wide variety of environmental print messages (road signs, toys, fast food signs, and household products) and were questioned regarding what the print said, what helped them determine the message, and anything else they might know about the object. Responses were analyzed from the semantic, syntactical, graphic, and semiotic perspectives, as well as in terms of response time and evolution. Results indicated the following: children pragmatically demonstrated highly developed levels of linguistic awareness; children expected print to be meaningful; and children's access to the pragmatic and semantic systems of language led to conventional control of the syntactic and symbolic systems of language. The latter finding is the reverse of the current instructional model. (DF)

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LANGUAGE AS SOCIAL EVENT

By
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Presentation given at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April 11, 1980.

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TEXT

Language is inherently social.

When I say that I mean that the very purpose, the very function of language is communication.

Language did not develop because of the existence of one language user, but because of two.

This is an extremely important point.

We often examine language as if it were internal to a single language user.

But this is misguided.

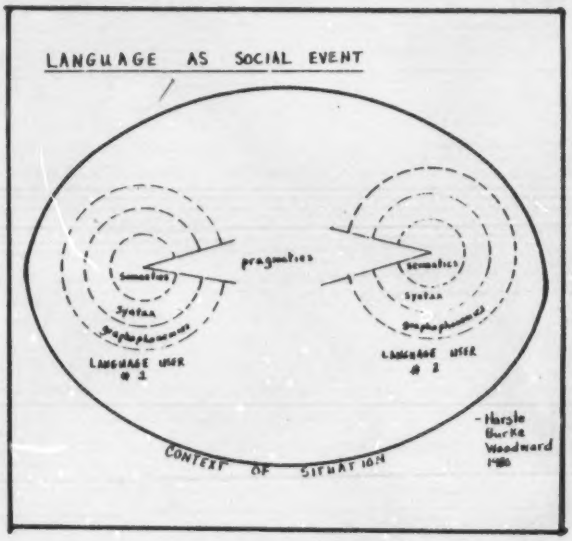
A real instance of language is not a real instance of language until it involves a second language user.

In most instances this is a real "another" language user, but in some instances -- such as in supposedly talking to oneself -- a "real" imposed another.

But its still social.

SUPPORT MATERIALS

OVERHEAD #1



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TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
And as such it is complex.	(CONTINUE OVERHEAD #1)
My principal argument today is that any instance of written language use and learning is best viewed as the orchestration of a complex social event.	
This position has important implications.	
Knowing that language is a complex social event sets parameters on not only the kind of language unit I can study, but the size.	
To be valid, language research must not violate what we know about the language event.	
What this means is that in order to examine any language phenoonema I need first of all a real instance of language, repleat in its social complexity.	
I need this whole real instance of language so that the phenomena I wish to study can be seen in relationship to the whole event.	

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
One really doesn't know what happening in one system of language if one doesn't know what hypothesis are being tested in the other systems of language and their relationship to one another. To have a piece of language data which is but part of a social event is to have nothing. Its the case of the archeologists nightmare. Its said that the nightmare of an archeologist is to find a fossil without the surrounding soil. Without the soil the archeologist knows nothing and can learn nothing of the origin of the fossil. It is archeologically worthless. Similiar, for the linguist. To have a bit of language without knowledge of the context which surrounded the generation of the bit, is to have nothing.	OVERHEAD #1 CONTINUED

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
But to say this is not even enough, for if I want to say something significant with my research, I must hastily add, that the social event which I elect to study must not be too strange. Often when attention is focused to the particular phenonema in which we are interested, the natural language process is invarily destroyed. Its like a physician studying respiration, if the subject thinks about breathing, the natural rhythm is invariently destroyed. So to have a piece of language data which represents an unnatural instance of the process is then to have nothing. Carolyn Burke, my brillant colleague at Indiana draws this analogy between language research and the language process: "Its like doing open heart surgery," says Burke, -"if the operation we perform, stops the natural process, all is for naught."	OVERHEAD NUMBER 1 CONTINUED

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Practically what this means is that if we wish to study linguistic awareness, metalinguistic awareness, morphophonological awareness or any other awareness, in order to do so, our most efficient paradign is not our most direct.	OVERHEAD #1 CONTINUED END OVERHEAD # 1
I have taken the time to develop this point because it lies at the heart of the issue we are addressing today.	
Where we begin does make a difference.	
And we get quite different results.	
I'd like to share with you today a portion of a taxonomy which my colleagues, Dr.s Carolyn Burke and Virginia Woodward, have developed for the study of written language growth and development from the perspective of social event.	
This taxonomy is essentially the operationalization at the paradign which you have been viewing.	

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
The particular social event we elected to study was one in which children encountered a wide variety of environmental print - road signs, fast food signs, toys, and household products, and were asked 3 questions: 1. What do you think ths says? 2. What things do you see that help you know what this says? and 3. Tell me some of the things you know about this. The subjects of our study were 68 3-4-5- and 6-year old, black and white, lower and middle SES children. Videotape protocols were cut of each session. Responses made by children were studied from a variety of perspectives: Pragmatically, semantically, syntactically, graphically and, yes even in terms of expressed linguistic awareness. Pragmatically we asked did the child choose to engage in the communication contract.	

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS

What was the language users communication decision?

We found the children selected several options:

Most maintained the contract - that is they responded to the question "What do you think this says?" with a response that was pragmatically appropriate.

Several however refused to participate and gave no response.

Others attempted to invalidate the contract saying, I don't know, I can't read.

Many renegotiated the contract and rather than answer the question what does this say, answered other questions like:

-What is this?

-What do you do with this?

-How do you spell this?

The pragmatic decision is important however because it is clearly inappropriate to ask certain questions of the

OVERHEAD #2

Reader Communication Decision	TOTAL Frequency
Q: What do you think this says?	
.1 No Response	.0325
.2 Attempts to Invalidate Contract Print: No Parking This Side Reader: I can't tell you, cause I can't read.	.0050
.3 Don't Know	.0600
.4 Symbol Focus: Naming/Sounding out Print: U.S. Mail Reader: U-S-E	.0350
.5 Renegotiates Communication Contract Print: U.S. Mail Response: a mailbox Print: Kroger Milk Response: Some milk goes in there.	.0950
.6 Maintains Communication Contract Print: U.S. Mail Reader 1: Mail Reader 2: U.S. Army	.7825

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
response if the communication contract is not maintained.	OVERHEAD #2 CONTINUED
And what this study of children's responses from a pragmatic perspective has taught us is that children are pragmatically very aware.	
So much so that 78% of all responses maintain the communication contract and all fall withing the range of options adults use in response to a question:	
That is, sometimes adults too	
-Refuse to respond	
-Attempt to invalidate the contract	
-Renegotiate the communication contract, (that is, answer a related but different question)	
-but most often, they maintain.	END OVERHEAD # 2
Often the child's communication decision involved his or her use of language about language.	

TEXT

Most instances involved what Yetta Goodman has called a functional use of the culture's language labels:

1. I can't even read that.

2. I don't know that word.

3. I don't know what it is, but there's a 't' in it.

Other instances reflected the child's own attempt to develop a convention similiar to the one the culture had selected:

That a 't' in my word - referring to his name.

B - Nobody - Nobody - y - a spelling out behavior which reflects the fact that the child knows letters have names; and these letters whose names he does not know are "Nobody."

And still a third set reflecting the fact that the child had abstracted out a generalization about language and how it works.

SUPPORT MATERIALS

OVERHEAD # 3

Language About Language

.1 Funchonal Use of Culture's Language Labels

Examples: • I can't even read that.
• I don't Know that word.
• I don't Know what it is, but there's a 't' in it.

.2 Personal Development of Functional Labels

Examples: • That's a 't' in my word.
• B - Nobody - Nobody - y.

.3 Language System Awareness

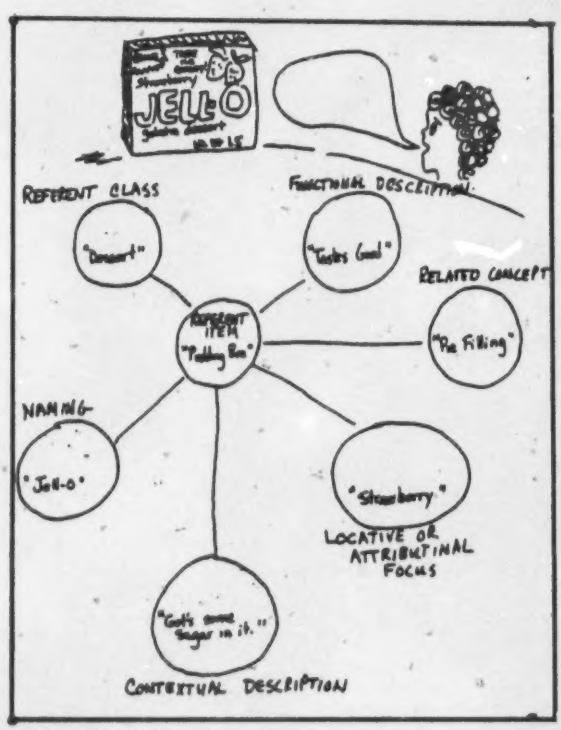
Examples: • That's a long word for a short sound.

←"Wendy's."
←"cup"

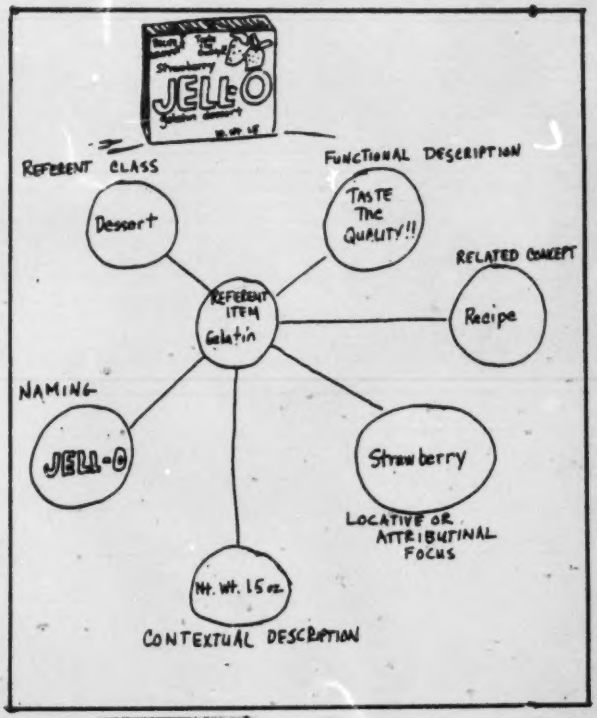
• Because its a "Kro" and I added G-E-R, and I Know its Kroger.

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Alison, a 4 year old, when shown a Wendy's cup and asked the question what do you think this says responded; "Wendy's" running her finger under Wendy's and "cup" running her finger under "hamburgers."	OVERHEAD # 3 CONTINUED
She paused a moment as if in reflection, then turned to the researcher and said, "That a long word for a short sound."	
Her response thereby showing that she had obviously developed some general rule about word length and word sound, and that this one broke that rule.	
Another child, Jake, 6 years old, when asked, "What things do you see that help you know what that says," repeatedly responded, "Because its a "Kro" and I add G-E-R and I know its "Kroger."	
Because it "Dyna" and I add M-I-N-T-S and I know its "Dynamints."	
His behavior across responses demonstrates his awareness of syllabication.	END OVERHEAD # 3

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
We, of course, studied childrens responses not only in terms of what they had to say about the systems of language (their expressed linguistic awareness), but also for demonstrated linguistic awareness. In this regard we studied each response and text from a -semantic perspective -syntactic perspective -graphic perspective as well as a semiotic perspective. We even further studied each response and text in terms of response time and evolution as often childrens responses across our 3 questions demenstratéd an evolving orchestration and control of the event. While time does not permit me to share all of our results - this feat will have to await a final report - I do wish to share with you some of our observations as they bare on the topic under discussion today.	

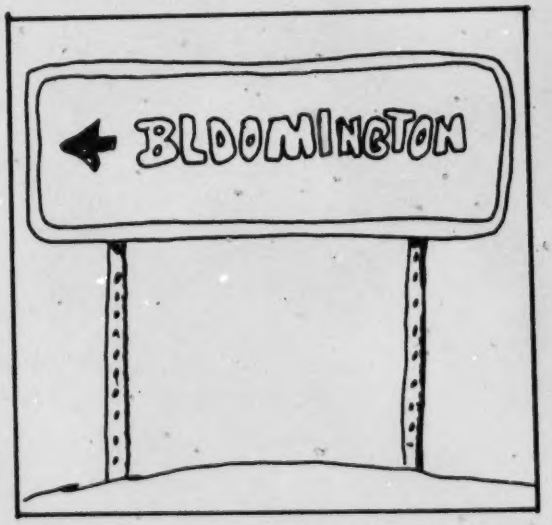
TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Every child we have studied, without exception; demonstrates highly sophisticated levels of linguistic awareness. In addition to the linguistic awareness children demonstrate pragmatically, all children demonstrate that they expect print to be meaningful and have semantic intent. Semantically the set of options which children select to talk about print coincides perfectly with the set of semantic features adults use to create environmental print setting. To explicate this point let's examine the semantic characteristics of responses we received to one item of print: Jell-O. Some children responded "pudding box" identifying the referent item. Others responded "pudding" or "dessert" identifying the class to which the referent belongs.	OVERHEAD #4 

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Some responses identified the function served by the referent item in relationship to the language user. "eat it"	OVERHEAD # 4 CONTINUED
Some identified a characteristic: Strawberry.	
Others identified a related concept: Pie Filling.	
Some named the referent item as particular: Jell-O.	
And some responses described the immediate context of the particular referent item shown: Got's some sugar in (referring to this particular box of Jell-O.)	END OVERHEAD # 4
What is fascinating, of course, is to examine the semantic relationship of the print on the box to the referent item being presented.	
When one examines the semantic characteristics of the print on a box of Jell-O to the referent it describes, what one finds is that the same semantic categories evolve as evolved when describing the children's responses.	BEGIN OVERHEAD # 5

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
That is Gelatin Dessert is print identifying the referent and referent class. Taste the Quality is a functional description of what you are to do in relationship to the referent. Jell-O is a particular name given the referent. Recipe is a related concept to Jell-O. Nt. Wt. is a contextual description of this particular box of Jell-O. Strawberry is an attribute, and so on. If anything profound can be said of our data it is that it provides clear evidence that the children have access to the pragmatic and semantic systems of language. 99.97% of all responses had semantic intent and are codable within the semantic feature framework I have shown.	OVERHEAD #5  END OVERHEAD # 5

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
It is the child's access to the pragmatic and semantic systems of language which leads to conventional control of the syntactic and symbolic systems of language. Thats the reverse of our current instructional model which is built from a belief that its access to the graphophonemic system which leads to control. Many would argue that linguistic awareness or a certain form of it - like morphophonological awareness - is key to access. Some even go so far as to say that such awareness must be expressed rather than just demonstrated. Our data would suggest its just another part of the complex social event which gets orchestrated. I am more convinced than ever that the real issue is that many seem to be confused about what written language literacy is and isn't.	

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Not having cleared this up, many confuse convention for language. Rather than explore the range of form available to language users in an attempt to mean; one form - the culture's selected preference, becomes yardstick and straightjacket. Clearly the advent of literacy cannot be said to begin when the child's response coincides with the culture's selected convention or we have no continuum, just a yes-no switch, which tells us nothing developmentally and less than we think about convention. And this says nothing about the fact that it makes the study of literacy about as interesting as the study of a light switch. The advent of written language literacy must be defined in terms of when evidence exists that the language user has made some decision which puts him or her in the ball park.	

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Access to the pragmatic and semantic systems of language is real access to literacy, whether or not the response looks graphophonemically controlled or syntactically conventional. Language is a semiotic process and control of the pragmatic and semantic systems of language is not literacy related behaviors but literacy, real literacy. Having made a pragmatic decision, effects the range of semantic and syntactic options available. Several of the children in one study looked at the road sign Bloomington and said "Book." Our explanation at that time was that they had gone from graphics to meaning a pattern atypical of the way they handled other instances of print. When we changed study sites, we decided we should give these new children the same advantage we had given children in our Bloomington Study.	OVERHEAD # 6  END # 6 -M

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS

We therefore showed children in Indianapolis the road sign of their city Indianapolis.

But low and behold several of the children in this sample too said "Book."

Clearly the graphic based explanation we had developed for the Bloomington kids didn't hold here.

In puzzeling over this egnima one of my graduate students said, "I know," and promptly produced the explanation.

On every Seseme Street book is the Seseme Street sign.

So what looked like a graphically driven response, was really arrived at through a reinstatement of a particular context of situation and a set of semantic options appropriate to this context, - the true advent of literacy, the true beginnings of an orchestrated complex social event.

OVERHEAD #7

OVERHEAD #8

SESAME STREET
WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY HIDE & SEEK IN THIS BOOK WITH LOVABLE, FURRY OLD GROVER?
PLEASE SAY YES!
Featuring GROVER, a Jim Henson Muppet
Written by Jon Stone
Illustrated by Mike Smollin

END OVERHEAD # 8

TEXT	SUPPORT MATERIALS
Viewing written language use and learning as the orchestration of a complex social event, allows us not only to see more but permits us to appreciate these events as the magnificent achievements they are. It is only by understanding written growth and development that we can address the issue of what is optimal instructionally. Currently we operate as if our instructional task were to simplify the complex event. But this is misguided, the systems operate in consort. Its not the complexity of the event which causes problems; rather its that the complexity supports control.	

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